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## New Media as Election Strategy: How Obama and McCain Court the Net Generation

by Brett McCracken

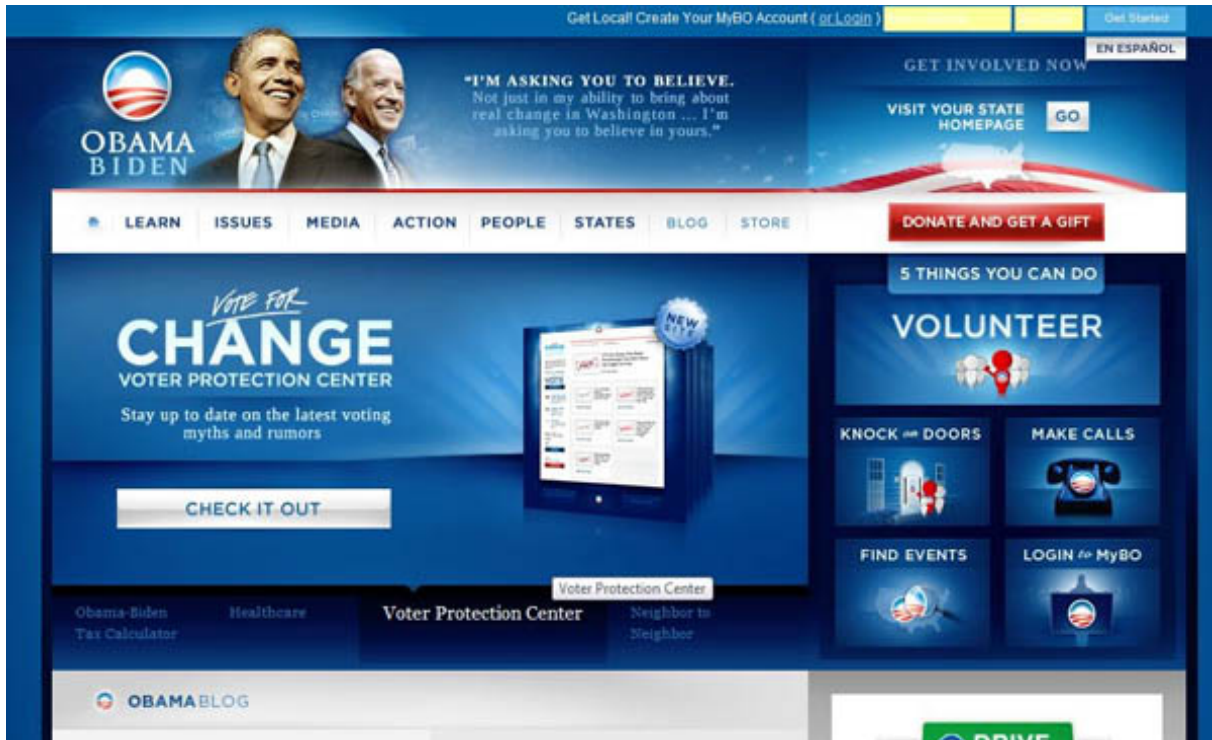


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Predictably, the 2008 presidential election has been the most mediated election in world history. In addition to the wall-to-wall coverage on cable news since early 2006, the election has pervaded our senses via the Internet in a myriad of forms. The presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain, have necessarily created the most widespread media presences of any political candidates in history. In addition to their monstrous websites, McCain and Obama have pages on virtually all the major social networking platforms.

Online social networking is, perhaps, for 2008 what television was for the 1960 election. According to Pew research, two-thirds of Internet users under the age of 30 have a social-networking profile, and half of those use social networking sites to get or share information about politics or the campaigns. It's a new, cheap, "grassroots" (a golden word for campaigns of any kind) way for candidates to shore up support, and McCain and Obama have jumped in with gusto. Both candidates are on Facebook (McCain has 214,482 supporters listed, Obama 1,380,827), and both have MySpace pages (McCain has 64,644 friends, Obama 457,188). Both are also on LinkedIn, Digg, Twitter, Flickr, and Eventful.



Interestingly, both McCain and Obama have also created their own unique social networking platforms hosted within their main sites: MyBarackObama.com and McCainSpace. I joined both of them in August and, unsurprisingly, was much more impressed with Obama's site. The registration process was remarkably similar for both sites (both ask you to write a few sentences about why you are voting for the candidate, what issues you are concerned about, your birthday, your location, and if you are registered to vote. The ever-inspired Obama adds the question, "What is your favorite motto or quote?"). Once you get going, the sites function like boring versions of any message board or online community. You can join groups, write blog posts, search for people, add video and photo widgets, etc.

For fun (and because there was hardly anything else to do), I joined groups on each site. On McCainSpace I joined the "California for McCain" group, which had a measly three members. In fact, the largest group on the whole site, called Generation 2008, had only 86 members (I joined that as well), which is less than the strikingly esoteric group I joined on Obama's site: "Emergent Christians for Obama in '08" (145 members on August 23). The level of activity on Obama's site was clearly much, much higher than on McCain's. Obama's site had ten groups created on August 23 (including "Trinidadian Americans for Obama" and "Barack O'ccultists of Utah").

McCainSpace—like his entire website—has a clunky, blasé feel to it. It is clear that McCain is taking notes from Obama’s site and adjusting as needed. McCainSpace feels like old white men trying to remain relevant in a web 2.0 world. On the opening pages, there is a video of McCain telling us how important the Internet is (as if we didn’t know!). “This election cycle has proven the importance of the Internet in our political process,” McCain pronounces in a YouTube/confessional style. “Social networking has given people from every corner of the world the ability to connect and share ideas. Sign up, check back every day, and ... have a lot of fun!”

This little introduction by McCain is followed by a video of a clean cut 20th-something white guy talking about why he supports McCain—low taxes and wind energy, of all things—which is then followed by an Asian woman, a Latino, another Asian, an African-American, and so on, giving their respective reasons for supporting McCain.

MyBarackObama.com, though scarcely more interesting or entertaining than McCainSpace, does at least feel more comfortable in its own skin. The style and typography is cohesive, it's easy to navigate, and it seamlessly fits into Obama's larger site (McCainSpace is actually good on this count too).

As crucial as these social networking platforms have become for these candidates' media strategies, another new media form might be even more important: online video. According to Pew research, 35% of Americans say they have watched online political videos in this election cycle—nearly triple the level of the 2004 race. As the first U.S. presidential election to occur in the YouTube age, it has proven crucial for both candidates to take advantage of this new viral wunderkind. McCain's YouTube channel (1,079,009 channel views at time of writing) featured what appeared to be both official and user-made campaign commercials. This clever video was featured on its main page on August 24, 2008:

Obama's Youtube channel (15,299,596 channel views) typically features a current speech by Obama or a music video chalk full of celebrities, like this one:

Both candidates have major presences in all viable new media formats. Obama clearly has the advantage in terms of traffic, though. The huge margins (at least 6:1 or 7:1) of visitors on Obama's various sites versus McCain's underscores little more than the fact that more than two thirds of young people (18-24) favor Obama over McCain in this election, and they are the most active users of new media and social networking sites. [Barackobama.com](http://Barackobama.com), for example, received 1,851,649 unique visitors in July 2008, while [johnmccain.com](http://johnmccain.com) attracted more than a million less visitors for the month, with 831,338. A simplistic explanation might read into this data a much stronger fervor for Obama over McCain. Well, yes, but maybe only among those who hang out on the web...

The emphasis on new media is important, but one must remember that the people new media most connects with (young people) are probably already going to vote for Obama. These are the kids who grew up in a networked world, where connections and collectivity and cooperation were their guiding virtues. "Yes we can" makes more sense to them than "I can," "I did" or "I will." They are also the kids who knew nothing other than change as the constant of their childhood, and Obama's mantle of change makes perfect sense to them. For Internet-bred, social-networked, YouTube-entertained youngsters, Barack Obama is the man. As such, Obama's dot com reach is far more significant than McCain's.

Alas, "Generation Net" is a risky demographic to depend upon in a presidential election. John Kerry won this demographic (18-24) in 2004, but lost the election. The problem isn't that millions of young people enjoy and take part in the candidates' web activities, it's that millions of these kids might not be of voting age. The fact is, "new media" is still a little too new for most American voters. No matter how cool, well-designed, and well-connected Obama's websites are, they still only reach a certain limited group of people. There is only so much a "web strategy" can do for a campaign.

Some election year, the revolution will be downloaded. The Internet will be everything for campaigns. But 2008 will not be the year.

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## NOTES

"Younger Voters & Obama Supporters Lead US Online Political Charge," Pew Internet and American Life Project. <http://www.marketingcharts.com> Statistics taken from web analytics site, [compete.com](http://compete.com).



### Author bio:

Brett McCracken graduated from UCLA's Cinema and Media Studies Masters program in



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